



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

WHEN DARKNESS PREVAILED

A Holocaust Memoir
Of
Margarita Turkov

Part I

I WAS A JEWISH CHILD

“In July of 1942 the plan for the “ultimate solution of the Jewish problem” entered its final phase: everybody who was not employed in one of the German shops in the Warsaw Ghetto was to be rounded up for deportation. Old people, the sick and children were no longer legal.

My parents obtained employment in a shop on Mylna Street and found a small, abandoned apartment a few houses away from the shop. There were no actions* before dawn or after sunset so they were not concerned about a hiding place for me in the apartment; we would leave before dawn and not return till after sunset. The challenge was to find a safe hideout during the day in the shop itself.

Situated in a cellar, the shop was quite cool even in the summer, especially in the early mornings. A round wooden coat rack on which workers hung their coats stood by the wall, just behind a big table around which sat my parents along with other men and women. They were supposed to polish teaspoons crafted by the men who worked at the machines in the middle of the room. It was decided that should it become necessary for me to hide, I would go under the coats of the coat rack. We practiced this maneuver and my parents felt I would be quite safe there unless, of course, the Germans decided to look through the coats. My mother instructed me not to leave my hiding place voluntarily, no matter what I heard happening in the shop. Should I be discovered, I was to pretend that I had fallen asleep and covered myself with the coats because I felt chilly.

I pondered over the logic of this argument in years to come. Children were no longer legal – how would pretending that I was legal and not hiding serve my case was beyond my understanding and the naiveté of my parents seemed not only unbelievable to me in years to come but, on some level, must have hit me even then, as further events will show. Those, however, were insane times and people came up with insane ideas in order to hold on to their hopes and keep their sanity.

The shop itself was a farce. There was no German overseeing it and with all the energy now put into deportations, little attention was paid to productivity; consequently, no work at all was taking place. Sentries were posted on lookout to give enough warning should any Germans come in sight. Then, machines were to be started up, the place

*The term used for a systematic roundup of Jews for deportation

turned into a beehive of productivity, and all the children hidden in their respective hiding places.

There were several children there beside myself, all trained what to do in case a signal was given to hide. For me, the possibility of actually having to hide was hard to conceive. What was real was that we went to the shop every morning and I got to play with other children all day long. Through a door from the shop we could go into another room which was not used for any work and which lead to the courtyard. It had a desk, some cupboards and a chest of drawers, and we were free to run back and forth, play ball, hide and seek, and many other games. At times, some of the men would show us what the machines in the shop could do when switched on.

In the evening, after leaving the shop, Daddy would often take me for a walk in the garden that lay between the shop and the house where we slept. Blue forget-me-nots lined the borders of the garden, multicolored cosmoses and many other flowers were in full bloom. Somebody must have been taking good care of this garden until quite recently. Twilight lasted long in the summer and I enjoyed this bit of freedom to walk together with my father along the colorful, fragrant flowerbeds after the daylong restriction to the shop. The memory of freely walking along the streets, going to school and visiting my friends belonged to some past life that seemed by then forgotten as the eight year old girl was adjusting to her current reality.

And the day came when the sentries gave their signal. All the machines got turned on, the noise was deafening, and suddenly I was under the coats. I somehow managed to rearrange the coats from within so that I could see what was going on through a large buttonhole I discovered in one of the coats. I could see my parents right in front of me, diligently polishing spoons. The range of my vision included the entrance door through which the Germans burst noisily in. All machines then stopped and only loud commands were heard as everybody was ordered out through the other room to the courtyard in the back.

I saw my parents get up and walk off without a glance in my direction. Within a few minutes I knew the room to be empty, except for the one soldier who stood in front of the street entrance to the shop, his rifle poised ready to fire. He would make half circles, covering the entire room from one corner to the other. I sat motionless, hardly daring to breathe. There were shouts, cries, a woman's wail, and other noises and voices coming from the courtyard. A sharp police whistle could be heard coming from an even greater distance – the street beyond? In the shop itself there was now total stillness. Soon I heard some soldiers come back and poke searching in the various nooks and corners of the room. They found one boy and were dragging him out, shouting at him to tell them if anybody else was hidden. The boy was crying, saying nothing. After a while I could hear another child's whimper and the soldiers' laughter – they had found another illegal trying to hide from them. And again quiet.

My mind was working very fast. I knew that despite Mama's injunction to the contrary, I didn't want to stay in my hiding place. The children who had been found so far were taken out and from the sounds I could hear coming from the back, everybody was still in the courtyard. If I got out now, I thought, I might still find my parents. But if I just ran out, wouldn't the soldier with the poised rifle shoot me? On the other hand, if I waited much longer and everybody was led away, surely once they found me they would not take me all by myself but would certainly shoot me right on the spot. I kept watching intently the one with the rifle.

Suddenly a tiny, muffled voice could be heard from the other room. The shop director's little niece, perhaps 2 or 3 years old, hidden in a drawer of the old chest, was heard asking, "Uncle, is it all over? Is it safe to come out now?" I held my breath: what will they do to the little one? I heard their voices, "*Ja, ja*, come out," as they dragged her out into the courtyard. And no sound of a shot. So the others must still be there. They did not shoot the little girl, and I no longer hesitated. I watched as the soldier at the entrance turned towards the corner furthest from where I was hidden and at the moment I was out of the range of his rifle I bolted out, running as fast as I could into the other room and then to the courtyard. I could hear the soldiers laughing behind me: another rat crawled out from the woodwork. But they did not even touch me, and I found myself in the crowded yard, asking people if they saw my parents.

I was pushed forward and squeezing between the ranks in the files already being formed, at times between somebody's legs, sometimes almost lunged forward, I found myself next to my daddy. He took my hand wordlessly and then said we had to find Mama because she got pushed and was now somewhere ahead of us.

We started squeezing forward through the by now more orderly ranks. It was harder than it had been for me alone. The Germans were screaming for order and everybody could be punished for our disorderly behavior. The column had already started moving forward and selection was taking place at the gate to the street. There it was being decided who was to be deported and who could remain. Daddy and I proceeded slowly. We would stop to form one orderly rank in the column and then Daddy would plead with the people in front of us to exchange places, begging them to help us get to Mama whom he could by then glimpse ahead of us, just a few rows away. We managed to reach her in time before the selection. Daddy continued his strong grip on my hand while he took Mama's hand in his other. She was frightened and an "Oh..." expressed her relief to have him by her side. Her eyes fixed on what was taking place ahead, she did not notice me on Daddy's other side; he whispered to her that I was with them. A groan escaped her, but whether it was relief or regret I could not tell and there was no time to speculate as we were now at the gate. The officer in charge of the selection directed one sharp look at Daddy and pointed to the right; barely glancing at Mama and me, he pointed to the left. Daddy never let go of our hands but very politely, in his perfect German, asked if he might be permitted to accompany his wife and child. Permission was granted.

Past the gate, there was a small group of young men standing on the right and a long column of people in the middle of the street to the left. The column extended over the whole length of the street block. These were no longer just people from our shop but also those from other shops in the street, as well as whomever else they managed to discover hiding in the abandoned houses of the area.

The three of us hastily joined a new, carefully forming orderly rank of five in a file. The column was already moving at a good pace and we soon turned the corner into the next street, marching through the deserted streets of the Ghetto.

The Warsaw Ghetto had been formed in 1940. Certain streets were designated exclusively for all the Jews of Warsaw and vicinity. Although for us this meant exchanging a comfortable apartment on Zelazna Street, a neighborhood where we lived all my life, for a railroad tenement on Nowolipki, a noisy, smelly section, for me it simply

was a new adventure – except that everybody was so gloomy and irritable. What bothered me most of all, though I would not have been able to put it into words, was the discrepancy between what my mama would tell me and the general feeling I was picking up all around me.

I had first experienced this a year before, after the bombings had stopped and the Germans were to enter Warsaw any day. Mama was determined to shield me from the pending reality and very sternly forbade any gloomy speculations concerning our possible fate in my presence. When that could not be avoided, as what else were people to talk about than their dread of life under German occupation, Mama would quickly intercept with a meaningful glance pointing at me, “Oh, come now, the Germans are after all human beings.” Yet I sensed the same apprehensions in my mother as in those others who freely admitted their fears. And, if there was really nothing to be afraid of, why was everybody so afraid? Something was obviously wrong and my mama wanted to keep it from me. But those were only very vague sensations I would not have been able to verbalize.

I remembered the word “ghetto” first mentioned after the Germans had entered Warsaw. I had gathered from overhearing snatches of conversation that it referred to separation of Jews from Poles, though I could never get it straight whether it was the Jews or the Poles that would have to move. Once I had asked my mother who explained that those were just rumors, things people liked to speculate about and that nothing was known for a fact. Indeed, we did continue to live in our apartment for almost another year, though with a great change: my cousin Jerzyk and his parents, my uncle Leopold and aunt Helcia Blumenfeld had moved in with us. They managed to escape from Lodz, where a Ghetto was already being established.

And now we were really to move! It would have been exciting were it not that everyone was very nervous and impatient with me. The good news was that Jerzyk and his parents were to stay with us in the new place as well. I was delighted because Jerzyk was my favorite cousin. He was seven years my senior and before the war he used to come and stay with us for his winter vacations, his visits always being lots of fun for me. Now, ever since they had moved in with us, Jerzyk became the big brother I never had and always longed for.

Soon we were all settled in our new home, my parents and I in one room, with a window looking out to Smocza Street. I could endlessly stand by the window watching the busy traffic below with fascination. My aunt, uncle and cousin occupied the other room. My parents became friendly with a family who lived one floor below us and had a daughter only slightly younger than I, who became my friend.* I made two more friends with Erik and Raja Ek, children of my parents’ friend who lived in another part of the house. Although they were several years older than I we often played together, usually in their apartment which was larger than ours. Jerzyk began to tutor me, as it was time for me to begin first grade and there was no school open that I could attend. He was patient and kind. Skillfully and with good humor he managed to turn each lesson into a fun game, and I adored him. Within less than two years I was ready to enter third grade in an underground school that had been set up in the Ghetto for children of parents who could afford to pay the tuition (or had special discount, as did my parents, due to their connections) and who could be trusted to keep the fact of the school’s existence from the

* Halina Pokorna and her parents survived and we met again after the war. They were the only ones of the people in my life from those days to survive.

authorities. We were drilled how to hide our books and notebooks, should some unwelcome visitors show up. In that event, we were to pretend it was merely a Community Center where children could play – that was legal at the time.

I liked school. Lessons came easily to me and I became great friends with several girls in my class with whom I could play after school. I knew we lived under conditions everybody thought very grim and dangerous, and on Hitler's birthday I wrote him a poem begging him to drop his animosity and become friends with everybody so that peace and joy could be enjoyed by all; personally, however, I was experiencing a rather normal eight year old girl's existence, at least on the surface. Mama indeed succeeded in this respect – until the deportations began.

One day in June of 1942 I went to school as usual. There I was greeted by an anxious teacher and concerned classmates. Simona Chanarin, who lived across the street and was always the first to come, did not show up that morning. One of the children went over to check on her and discovered that the whole family had disappeared. Simona was very popular in our class and was one of my best friends. She, Noemi Berkowicz and I were an inseparable trio spending much time together after school hours. Someone suggested I run over to see my father who was known to be working at the Jewish Social Self-help (JSSH). He would surely know what had happened and if there was anything that could be done to help the Chanarins.

When I reached my father's office I also found my mother there. They told me Simona was quite safe* but that I better not return to school and remain with them in my father's office for the rest of the day.

I never went back to that school and never again saw either of my two best friends, nor any of my other friends and teachers. "Resettlement" had begun.

For a while Mother and I would go with Father to his office, which was considered safe for the staff and their immediate families. I was not allowed to go anywhere any longer by myself and life became a drag. I could not understand why my parents tried to avoid being resettled and I secretly wished we would stop being "safe" and made to resettle. At least there would be some new adventure, as otherwise life had become an awful bore. Jerzyk, who had not been well for a while now, disappeared one day without ever having said good-bye to me. I was told he was sent to a sanatorium where he would get better food and have cleaner air so he could get well.** My aunt and uncle moved out so as to live closer to their new place of work. I never saw any of them again. My father's twin sisters Sylva and Ruta, whom I loved and often used to visit, came one day to say goodbye because they decided to resettle voluntarily. They had no work, no money left, and hardly anything to eat. It was announced that those who go voluntarily could take a suitcase with personal belongings and receive some bread and *ersatz*† marmalade to take on the journey. They promised to write and let us know where they were and what were the conditions. "Oh, why couldn't we also go?!" I pleaded silently, not daring to say it aloud, however, since my parents were so opposed to it and seemed to consider themselves lucky that we were still able to remain.

* Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto who had foreign passports had that day been told to report to a certain hotel from where it was believed at the time that they would be exchanged and "repatriated." The Chanarins had French passports and my father believed this ruse when reassuring me that my friend was safe...

** Indeed, there was a sanatorium in Otwock, near Warsaw, and somehow it was managed to get Jerzyk in. After the war I found out he was shot there.

† German word for substitute or replacement. While it was known as "fake," it was a delicacy for us, not having tasted the real for too long.

We never heard from my two aunts and I never saw them again.

Then, a month later, more changes: it was July 1942 and suddenly all of those previously exempted from resettlement were no longer allowed to remain in the Ghetto unless employed in one of the German shops and their children were not exempt from deportation.

When we started marching, Daddy was still between Mama and myself and I was the first in our rank of five. The guards accompanying us started dealing out blows to people in the outer file but Daddy managed to push me inside, next to Mama, just in time for a blow to land on his head instead of mine.

Ahead of Daddy now trudged an old man with a child in his arms who could hardly keep up the pace. The guard who at first seemed to deal the blows out at random now began to concentrate on those who could not keep up with the constant orders to move faster and faster. He hit the old man and moved on to inspect another part of the column. When he returned, he ordered Daddy to push the old man and observing Daddy's unwillingness to do so, started to hit him as well. I knew Daddy was not going to push the man so I felt relief when the guard moved on to another victim from time to time.

Our column was so long that as we marched through some shorter streets people in the front had already turned the corner into another street while those in the back were still in the street we had already turned from. Guards were running back and forth but there were moments when none of them were in sight. There was no guard in the immediate vicinity as we were approaching a corner where Daddy saw a policeman he knew coming from the opposite direction. Daddy grabbed me and threw me at the man. "Save her!" he screamed out, and the next moment my Daddy and Mama were already out of sight.

The astonished policeman seemed as bewildered as I at what had just occurred, but soon arrived at a decision. "Come with me," he said and took my hand. He turned back in the direction from which he had come and we walked very quickly through some equally deserted side streets until we reached a big square. In the middle of this square sat, as if on a throne, the five-star chief of the police. There was a crowd of people in front of him, some kissing his hands, some holding on to his feet, all begging and imploring, weeping and moaning. My escort pushed through these people as he took me directly to the Chief and said, "This is Turkov's little daughter – do something for her," and left me there.

The Chief nodded at me and pointed to his left. "See the group forming by that street? Go there. They will go back to the Ghetto."

I took a good look at the square. It was a strange part of town where I'd never been before. Several streets led into the square from two sides to the right and left of the Chief. Behind him, at less than one block's distance were barbed wires behind which I could see the train and people being pushed to enter it. In front, at the far end facing the Chief, there were some buildings. I looked toward the group the Chief had pointed out. It was all very strange. No German was now in sight anywhere, but I could not believe a group would simply march back into the Ghetto. Besides, what I was interested in was finding my parents. I would not hesitate one moment going behind the barbed wires and to the train were I certain my parents were there. They certainly were not in the group supposedly going back to the Ghetto. I strained my eyes for any sign either of my parents

or anybody from the shop who could tell me where they might be, but no familiar face was in sight. I had moved away from the Chief and kept turning in a circle, looking in every direction and not able to decide which way to go. Where had the long column of people disappeared? I knew better than get too close to the barbed wires because once pushed behind them I could not come back, but what if my parents were actually there? The square was brimming with activity supervised by the police and nobody paid any attention to me. I was just about to edge a little bit closer to the barbed wires so as to better see the faces behind them, when I felt myself being lifted up with something dark flung over my head. I was in too much of a shock to scream. Whoever was carrying me seemed to be running and before any thoughts had a chance to form inside my head I was put down, the blanket in which I was swathed removed, and in front of me, her arms outstretched, was my Mama.

Only much later did I learn how it all transpired. As the column from Mylna Street wound its way street after lifeless street, with only an occasional Jewish policeman in sight, grapevine through the latter swiftly carried the news that Yonas Turkov and Diana Blumenfeld got caught.

My parents were well known. Before the war, they were both actors (Blumenfeld was my mother's maiden and stage name). Eschewing popular melodramas of the Yiddish theater, they brought the best of the world's dramatic literature along with Jewish classics to the Yiddish stage. My mother did all the translations. Besides appearing in Warsaw, they traveled to the most remote little Jewish towns and villages in Poland and neighboring countries, offering to many their first taste of the best theater could offer. While what they presented may have been too "high brow" for many, most were nevertheless appreciative of the experience and honored my parents for making such enriching as well as entertaining contribution to their lives.

In the Ghetto, my mother began her singing career. At first she appeared at informal concerts organized by various house committees, but soon became sought by an increasing number of groups who longed for a little cheer and the catharsis her songs provided. Mama had no voice training but she had a unique style of interpreting a song and carefully chose her repertoire, later having many songs written and composed especially for her. She became known and beloved as one who expressed the hopes and woes of the oppressed Jewish people, the reality of life within the Ghetto as well as memories of how it once was (and might be again when this nightmare was over?...) She lifted people out of their daily drudgery and helped them to, at least for a short time, forget about their uncertain future.

My father, who became involved with the JSSH soon after the war broke out, was respected for the work he managed to do despite the restrictions imposed by the Germans; many were grateful for the help they, their families and/or friends received either from him personally or through his office. Although a section within the Jewish Council that was set up by German order soon after the occupation of Warsaw in order to regulate Jewish life in the city and be responsible for implementing all the new laws pertaining to Jews, the JSSH was separate and not involved in the grim responsibilities of the overall work which was imposed on the Council. The JSSH section continued to quietly help, the best they could, finding roof over the head and/or a garment to cover the bodies for some, identity cards and food coupons for others, and give whatever relief was still possible for the unfortunate, needy Jewish population. And the population kept increasing as some escaped from other parts of Poland and managed to reach Warsaw, while others were forcefully thrown here from other countries.

Once all the Jews were within the confines of the Ghetto, even before the wall that was to surround the Ghetto and completely separate Gentiles from Jews was completed the Germans ordered formation of the Jewish Police Force. Nobody had any illusions as to what the function of the Force was going to be. While no sane person could envision the ultimate plans being made for all the Jews under the Occupation and the ultimate role the Jewish Police would be forced to play, it was obviously going to be an arm used directly by the Germans. Some joined the Police rationalizing that at least they would be gentler with the population, even while fulfilling German orders, than would be the criminal elements, many of the latter being among the first to enlist in this Force which offered them “productive employment” of value to those in power and assured them and their families their daily food rations as well as overall protection from harm – or so it was believed. Some joined in desperation, when nothing else was working out for them, hunger and illness threatening their nearest and dearest. Others joined only when the deportations started, hoping to save their families and, perhaps, help and protect others as well.*

As soon as it became known that my parents were on the way to the trains, a plan to rescue them was devised. At one end of the square known now as the *Umschlagplatz*,** across from the barbed wires and the waiting trains, stood the Jewish hospital. Several doctors and nurses were still permitted to look after the few patients not yet rounded up for deportation. There had been a major action at the hospital the day before and it was certain an action would not be repeated there that afternoon. Most of the beds were empty. The plan was to snatch my parents away from the column as soon as they came to the square and push them into the hospital. In the evening, once the actions for the day were over, they could be returned to the Ghetto in an ambulance, disguised as doctors.

The rescue was accomplished without a hitch, though my parents were concerned about me, thinking that had my father not given in to his crazed impulse I would now be there, safe with them. They had no way of finding out what that policeman whom my father entrusted with my life had done with me. Both tempted to look out of the window, perhaps make contact with someone who would know, but they were sternly ordered to lie quietly in their beds till it was all over; above all, nobody was to go near any of the windows. So long as there was still an action in process in the square, there must be no movement within the hospital that might attract attention.

My mother was never able to explain what had made her suddenly jump up and go to the window; it was as if a force stronger than all the reasons to the contrary bid her to look out and before the others managed to pull her back, insisting she was endangering them all, she had caught sight of me alone out there, turning round and round in the middle of the square.

“My child!” she screamed as she grabbed the arm of one of their rescuers. “My little girl is out there!!” When they forced her away from the window, she implored someone to run out and get me. She was hysterical by then and pleaded, kicked, beat them and cried until she heard a young man’s stern, “Be quiet now – I’ll get her for you.” Only when she saw him grab a blanket and dash out of the hospital she began to calm

* Gradually, they no longer could protect even their immediate family and were finally themselves deported.

** Translated as a trans-shipment center, in my memory it remains as the place near which everyone dreads finding oneself and once having been taken there, few have ever been seen again.

down and compose herself. A few minutes later I was in her arms with my father holding us both and the three of us huddled together waiting for the sun to set.

My father's head began to buzz with plans. There were friends he would have to locate immediately. Children were being smuggled out of the Ghetto to safe places on the Aryan side* and he must find a way to get me out of this hell. They had no money left or anything valuable for the smugglers, but surely there would be something he could do! Surely he still had friends and influence...

His thoughts were interrupted by the announcement that it was safe to go back. My father was issued a doctor's coat and my mother a nurse's apron. They sat stiffly with me hidden under their seat, covered by Mama's long apron, as the horse-drawn ambulance slowly took us back to Mylna Street.

Few of the familiar faces were to be seen in the shop the following day. Of the children, besides myself, there was only a ten-year-old boy who had remained safely hidden behind a double wall in one of the closets. His father had passed the selection; his mother was gone. We did not speak of what had occurred the day before. We hung out together on and off during the day while the adults sat or stood around in small groups, faces full of concern, discussing their situation, arguing.

My daddy was nowhere to be seen and Mama called me over to sit with her, away from the others. She told me Daddy was making arrangements for me to be taken out of the Ghetto and placed somewhere where I would be safe till the end of the war. When I protested I didn't want to be safe, I only wanted to be with them, for the first time Mama spoke to me of the possibility that the "resettlement" really meant death. It did not matter to me, I insisted. I did not mind dying as long as we went to die together. We both cried and clung to one another, but after a short time Mama said that she did not want to die. She said that once she and Daddy knew I was safe, they would look for ways to save themselves as well, but that would not be possible if I stayed with them.

Again the next day Mama pleaded with me to agree to our separation, again stressing how much she wanted to live and how it would not be possible for her and Daddy to fight for their lives as long as they had to worry about me. Once they knew I was safe, they could do things that were impossible to do with a child along; when the war was over, they would certainly get me back.

One evening soon, Daddy told me that a place was being prepared for me in a convent where I would be well taken care of. He spoke as if the matter had been decided, as if my agreement to go had either been secured or was not relevant. I remembered Mama's arguments and how much she did not want to die and how my remaining with them could cause her death, so when she then looked at me, still wanting to hear me say I was willing to go, I nodded my consent.

From that day on, every day Mama would talk to me and check to see if I really understood and would remember. First and foremost, I had to forget I had been Jewish. I was not to admit that, regardless of how I would be questioned, no matter what I might be promised or how nice, understanding and caring the person interrogating me might seem

* Poles were considered Aryan (despite the German belief that the Slavs were only a ladder or two above the Jews and other "subhumans," and the term soon became commonplace when referring to the Gentile population in Poland.

to be. Until the war was over and either my parents came to get me or I could go to some freely existing Jewish community and tell them who I was, I was NEVER AND UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCE to ADMIT that I WAS JEWISH. Should I hear a Yiddish word or song, or name or reference to anything Jewish I was to remain innocent of any understanding. I was to have NEVER KNOWN ANY JEWS IN MY LIFE. Even if I were to be taken in front of them, my parents, I MUST PRETEND NOT TO KNOW THEM, that being of utmost importance not only for my safety but for theirs as well, she insisted. From the moment I left them till after the end of the war, I must pretend not to know them should I ever see them! And, needless to say, the same was to be true of anybody I have ever known. I was to remember a totally new identity upon which we then began to work.

We considered names and decided on one to go on my forged papers, which I could easily remember. Should I ever before the end of the war hear someone call me by my real name, I must never respond. Until my papers were all finally worked out, we could not go over many details that I would have to memorize later on. I would have to remember strange information as to where I was born, who my parents were, and how I came to the convent. I had to promise my mother I would listen carefully and learn all I was told to learn should the papers not be ready until after I was no longer with Mama to coach me.

I would also have to learn, Mama said, Catholic prayers and rituals. She warned me that there would be much to learn and I would need to be just as good at memorizing it all as if I were preparing for a part in a school performance, as I had performed in my kindergarten just before the war. Not only that, I needed to pretend I truly believed all I would be taught and from then on act as if I had believed it and known all the prayers, rituals and customs all my life. The nun who was going to teach me would know I was Jewish, but she would certainly be gratified to see my enthusiasm to learn and my apparent devotion to my new religion. At some point later on, Mama added that should they want to actually convert and baptize me, I must not object. “Anything, anything,” my Mama whispered as she looked at me with her eyes red from crying and tears still almost constantly running down her cheeks. “Just live, survive – and never forget us,” she implored. And again, she assured me they would both do all they could in order to also survive, and how much she wanted to live to see me grow up in a better world.

Although my parents performed in Yiddish, we spoke Polish at home, my parents turning to Yiddish when they were talking about something they did not want me to understand. Eventually I began to understand this language and they switched to Russian on such occasions. I thought Yiddish was just another language, not aware it was the language of Jews just as I was not aware of the words “Jew” or “Judaism” until I was about four and a half years old when my peaceful stay at a playground was suddenly, frighteningly interrupted.

Stasia was a woman who lived with us as long as I could remember (and continued with us until the outbreak of the war). She cleaned, cooked, and looked after me. One of our regular walks took us to a garden at the end of our street. It was a considerable walk, but I always enjoyed it. We had to walk over a bridge under which trains went to and from the Warsaw Main Railway Station, and I loved to stop, lean

against the railing and watch the trains below as they passed. Eventually we would make it to the garden.

One day in 1938, after Stasia had settled herself on a bench near the sandbox where I was playing, she became aware of a commotion at the further end of the garden. Soon Stasia could make out what was happening: a madwoman was raging and beating up Jewesses, followed by a group of women who encouraged her and pointed out prospective victims. Stasia, dark haired and not of typically Slavic features, became concerned for her own safety. She grabbed me and started steering towards the street. Sensing something unusual was taking place, I did not argue or resist but docilely left my hand in hers as her pace quickened. The crowd was now in our pursuit, some women yelling and pointing at Stasia: "There's another one!"

Even as Stasia was pulling me and breaking into a run, I managed to turn around and yell: "She is not a Jewess, she is not!" I had no idea what it meant. Apparently it was something not good to be and my Stasia could certainly not be anything but good and my voice carried all of my indignation at such a mistake.

The madwoman and her crowd of cronies seemed only interested in the women who were in the garden and did not follow us once we had reached the street; nevertheless, Stasia hurried me home. Later, I asked Mother whether Stasia was Jewish. When Mother replied that no, Stasia was not Jewish, I beamed, "I was right, I told them the truth!" I felt triumphant about having been right in defending Stasia. It did not occur to me then to ask what a Jew was. However, another question did come up all of a sudden, "Are we Jewish?" I was dumbfounded when my mother's answer came quietly, "Yes, we are."

For the next several weeks I continued questioning my mother whether or not this or that person was a Jew or a Jewess, and soon became aware that all our family, most friends, and some of the shopkeepers we patronized were Jewish. But it was merely a new discovery in the mystery of the world I found myself in. It did not occur to me to ask why that madwoman wanted to beat up Jewesses and the other women found it such a delightfully hilarious game. I was not yet five years old and just accepted things and events as they came. Had the madwoman been beating up blondes or redheads, I would not have questioned what it meant to be a blonde or a redhead – it was obviously just something one was born like. Being a Jew seemed nothing more than another way of identifying people, just as I learned to say "a blonde" or "a brunette" when identifying women of a certain hair color. That was all there was to it as far as I was concerned at the time – just facts I was learning without concern for any meaning behind those facts. I seemed to have forgotten all about it and did not notice that we never went to that garden again because I was enrolled in a kindergarten near our house where I attended until the summer of 1939 and on the 1st of September the war broke out.

Both my parents had come from traditional, orthodox homes, where all the religious laws were strictly observed, but both, along with their siblings, rejected their religion considering it totally meaningless -- a superstition to be discarded. My parents proclaimed themselves to be atheists. Being Jewish meant for them certain traditions, a rich culture and the Yiddish language with all its literature and humor; it meant, though they probably would not have described it as such, belonging to a closely knit clan with strong family bonds, warm friendships, and a loyalty to one another as members of a perpetually hated and persecuted people. Their morality was based on humanitarian values rather than fear of God or a blind acceptance of laws either religious or secular.

I remember once asking my mother if God existed (I may have then been six or seven years old) and she answered that nobody really knew. It baffled me that here was something grownups did not know, as I had still believed then that they had an answer for everything. By the time I was eight, shortly before the deportations started, I suddenly decided not only that God existed but that there were two gods: a Jewish and a Polish one, and I was drawn to the latter. I don't remember anything that might have been responsible for this conclusion or had led me to it. Did I hear or read something that impressed me so? As far as I can remember, it just happened and I needed to keep it secret. This was my first big secret from my parents and Jerzyk. Neither did I discuss it with either of my two best friends, but once, talking with another school friend I was prompted to ask her if she believed in God. When she admitted that she did, I pressed on whether the Jewish or the Polish one, to which she shyly admitted that she believed in the Polish one. "I too, I do too believe that..." was my own response, and I felt relief at not being the only one with such an unusual conviction. I felt a strong urge to learn how to practice that religion and once, very casually, asked Jerzyk how the Poles prayed. Jerzyk informed me that they cross themselves but mistakenly showed me the sign how the Pope would bless his flock rather than how an individual crosses oneself. From then on I tried to find some privacy every day to execute that blessing sign which I believed was the correct way to pray...

When after our escape from the *Umschlagplatz* my parents insisted I had to leave them and I finally agreed to the separation, one great consolation for me was the fact that I would be going to a convent where they would teach me all I wanted to know about what I by then believed to be the true religion.

The day came when my parents told me I would be leaving the Ghetto at dawn of the following day. There wasn't much left that could be said by then. After Mother tucked me in my bed, my parents' hushed voices lulled me to sleep, still in the safety and security of being at home with them. I was groggy when my mother woke me up and helped me dress at what seemed to be still the middle of the night. Wordlessly, soundlessly, my mother was weeping, her tears wetting my face as she kissed me when we embraced for the final goodbye. She handed me a bag with a notebook, a pencil an *ersatz* marmalade sandwich.* She told me to write when I started to feel lonely and miss them, that this notebook could be my new friend to whom I could unburden myself.

Although my heart was beating wildly as I was taking leave of my mama, I remained composed and brave, just like Daddy had told me to be when we were running from a house on fire among falling bombs in 1939. Our apartment was on the third floor and rather than have to run down to the shelter each time the siren announced imminent bombardment, which started happening more and more frequently, we had moved in with my grandfather and my two aunts who lived on the ground floor in a house not too far away. When eventually that house was hit, Father decided it would be best if we returned

* The bread we had consisted of sand and, except for the bakers, nobody probably knew what else; still, it was precious and helped keep us alive. Before I had the chance to eat this sandwich, I was given some real food by the people where I was taken and having tasted that I could later no longer bring myself to eat that bread. Knowing that my parents probably went hungry for the rest of that day in order to give me that sandwich, I could not bring myself to throw it out. I thought I would at least feed it to a hungry dog, but the dog, having sniffed it, refused the offer.

to a basement shelter of our own house and the three of us separated from the others and started running, avoiding falling debris from the houses which had been hit. The distance to our house this time seemed endless and I was very frightened as a bomb might hit us at any moment. Daddy pulled me close as we stopped for a moment's rest and looked at me gravely. "Mama is so afraid, that the two of us must be strong and brave," he had said then...

Mama remained now at the top of the landing, watching as Daddy and I walked down the dark staircase to the street. Daddy led me along several empty streets in the still pre-dawn darkness. We kept as close to the houses as possible and ran across intersections till again some buildings offered their shadowy protection against our being detected. I was fully awake by the time we arrived at Chlodna Street where there was some activity. A young man emerged from the shadows as soon as we stopped in front of one of the houses. He shook hands with Father and said we had no time to lose because the labor battalion scheduled for work that day on the Aryan side was already here, and I was to cross with them. We were less than a block's distance from the gate through which there was a well-guarded passage to the Aryan side.

Everything had been planned for days. It was not safe to approach most of the guards, or to trust those willing to be bribed. Father had originally been assured that everything was solidly arranged for me to leave safely, but as he was taking in the scene near the gate where a group of men were being inspected, he wavered with handing me over. The young man quickly reassured him that this shift was safe and the guards at the gate this morning could be trusted not to notice a little girl walking out along with the men; those guards who would be escorting the contingent were also bribed not to notice as one man and the child who walked out with him from the Ghetto would slip away into one of the side streets of Aryan Warsaw.

Daylight was growing stronger when Father squeezed me in a tight hug and let me go. The man who took me from my father introduced me as "This is the girl," to another young man who, along with the rest of the group, was waiting for their escorts to complete the check and march them over. Almost immediately we were crossing the opened gate.

It all went so smoothly that before I was over the shock of having let go of my father after our quick embrace, I was yanked out of the orderly marching troop and pulled away to casually walk down a side street, speed up round the next corner, a few more turns, then again slowly, casually, cross a wooden gate into a yard.

The trauma of this separation from my parents would not be felt till some time later when, not having been placed in the convent, I would experience the full impact of being among strangers who did not love me and many of whom, much as they hated the Germans, were gleefully vocal expressing their gratitude that at least one good thing was happening: those enemies were cleansing Poland of a vermin – the Jews.

Part II

M A R Y S I A

Several friendly faces, young men and women, welcomed me warmly at the place to which I was taken. I was told that my papers were not yet ready and I could not go directly to the convent, but that someone would come in the afternoon and take me to where I could stay for the time being.

I was given a fresh, crisp, buttered roll with ham, the fragrance and taste of which will forever remain in my memory. Later we all ate together potatoes with blueberries and I felt almost drunk with such delicious, for so long not experienced joy of eating real, fresh, nourishing food.

After some time came Panna Basia, a young woman who was to take me to my next destination. She told me that we were on the way to meet Pani Borcinska, the lady with whom I would be temporarily staying. We rode on two streetcars and walked a bit before we met whom I perceived to be an older woman walking with a small black dog on a leash. The woman seemed to be perhaps 40 years old, had dark hair with many gray ones already visible and was wearing big, horn-rimmed glasses. Later I would see that her eyes were gray, turning very dark when she was angry.

The two women shook hands and greeted each other warmly. They seemed very fond of one another, obviously pleased to be meeting again. We were introduced briefly as “Pani Borcinska” and “Marysia.” My new name was Maria Konrad and I was already beginning to get used to people calling me Marysia. Mother and I had agreed it would sound most like my nickname, “Marita,” by which I was known ever since I started to speak and had difficulty pronouncing my full name, Margarita. To appease my only living grandfather for not giving me a “proper Jewish name,” my mother managed to make it up that she was really naming me after my two grandmothers, Margula and Ita, and only “modernized it” a bit. But while my given name was not Jewish, it definitely was not a Polish name either and had to be changed along with the rest of my identity, as only Jews in Poland would give their child a foreign name.

After Panna Basia left us, saying that she would come back for me soon, Pani Borcinska and I still had to walk quite a bit before reaching her apartment house. Although she looked a bit stern, she was friendly enough. She told me she had a daughter, Bozenka, who was about my age, another daughter, Danusia, already grown up, and a son, Bogdan, who was fifteen. Her husband worked in a factory. She told me that they all knew I would be coming and who I really was, but should any neighbor or anybody at all ask, I was to say that I was a relation who came to visit them from the country. She stressed that it would be altogether best to avoid conversations with strangers. The name of the dog was Komar, and they also had a cat whom I would find in the apartment.

The apartment was on the fourth floor in one wing of the large house on Wspolna 73 corner Emilia Plater. It consisted of two rooms. The kitchen served as the living and dining space. The stove stood at the wall opposite the entrance door, a double bed that I would share at night with the two daughters stood against the wall with the door to the other room. Along the same wall, past the door to the other room, was a large sink. At the opposite wall was a window looking out into the courtyard, and a table stood under the

window, to be pulled out when everybody was home for a meal together. The other room, I was informed, was rarely used. Along one wall there was a double bed where the parents slept and a couch for their son stood along the opposite wall. A big table with chairs around it stood in the middle of the room. The window here was facing Emilia Plater Street and along the wall opposite it, by the door to the kitchen, stood a chest of drawers, which served as an altar. A large picture of Mother Mary and baby Jesus hung above the altar. The door between the kitchen and this room was usually closed.

We sat down by the table in the kitchen. Pani Borcinska gave me some children's magazines to read while she busied herself with darning some socks. Before long, Bozenka arrived. I was told Bozenka would soon go down to wait for her father who was about to return from work and that I could go with her to meet him. Bozenka and I were still a little shy with one another but Pan Borcinski greeted us both warmly and then chatted easily with his daughter. It was about ten in the evening by the time everybody assembled for supper and I was almost dizzy with all the new impressions. I was glad when right after supper I was told it was time for bed.

I awakened from deep sleep as someone was urgently shaking me and I could then hear a siren warning of an approaching air raid. It was very confusing to me because such sirens had not been heard in Warsaw since 1939 and Warsaw had not been bombed since the Germans entered almost three years before; but there was no time for questions. I was told to dress quickly and while we were still groggily fumbling with our clothes Pani Borcinska grabbed both Bozenka and me, herding us down to the cellar. The cellar was already crowded with other tenants of the house and bombs could soon be heard falling not far from us, the walls in our shelter seeming to move with each explosion. Pani Borcinska stood in front of Bozenka and me, her arms protectively encircling us both, tightening the hug each time a detonation was felt. During a momentary pause between the blasts, someone tried to reassure the others, "Nothing to worry about, they just want to drop a few on the Ghetto – finish off the Yids. This was received with giggles from some of the others. The next explosion muffled the groan that escaped me, but Pani Borcinska had heard it and lowered her head to hiss into my ear, "Not another sound out of you..."

As our neighbors in the shelter continued to comfort themselves with the idea that the bombs were meant for the Ghetto, interspersed with various derogatory remarks about Jews, mocking their present fate, I could not contain the sobs that overcame me. "I want to go back to my Mommy," I whispered, forgetting all my promises to forget about who I was. All the preparation for what I might have to confront did not prepare me for this. I had, after all, agreed to leave my parents so that they could live! If they were now to be "finished off," killed by the bombs, I wanted to be there with them.

Pani Borcinska hissed again I should keep my trap shut and not dare utter another sound. In case somebody had overheard me, she quickly said aloud to whoever might be interested that this relative of hers had just arrived from the country because her parents had been sent for labor in Germany and the child was still confused. This was greeted with some clucks of commiseration and a sigh over what the Polish people were suffering under the occupation. I could bite my lips against a sound escaping, but I had no control over the tears, the shaking of my body, and an occasional louder sob escaping. While Pani Borcinska continued to keep a protective arm round Bozenka, her other arm was now on my neck, no longer a protective gesture but ready to either put a fist into my

mouth to block a sound escaping or to squeeze my neck, making me immobile, should any further behavior of mine provoke it.

Nothing much was said after the all clear sounded and we returned upstairs to go straight back to bed. I did not learn of the real purpose of that air raid till much later. It was the first Russian campaign to bomb German military installations in Warsaw, one of which was very near our house. At the time I believed what I had heard in the shelter and for the next several days I could not stop crying. I kept saying I wanted to go back till Pani Borcinska told me curtly that was not possible and then simply ignored me. Tears kept just pouring out of my eyes. No sobs, no sounds, just tears and the need to constantly blow my nose. I was spending most of the day crying and washing the several handkerchiefs I had brought with me, until Pani Borcinska could stand it no longer. "What's the matter with you anyway? One might think someone was hurting you here! If you don't stop the nonsense this instant, I will really give you something to cry about." I stopped, and I did not cry again for many years to come.

But I began wetting the bed at night. The first time it happened I was mortified to wake up and realize what I had done. It happened to me once before, shortly before I left the Ghetto. I was terribly embarrassed then but my mother simply said it was an accident and I should not give it any mind. Later, I overheard her whispered conversation with Father expressing the hope that it was indeed only an accident and not some infection of the bladder for which they would have no medicine. I was already plagued with abscessed sores which my mother believed were due to lack of vitamins and she kept giving me thinly sliced raw onions with whatever food we had, hoping it would help. Onions were still rather easily found and I actually liked the taste of the onion that covered up the otherwise horrible taste of our bread.

The fact that bed-wetting could have an emotional basis was not understood then. No such accident recurred, however, until that night when I was no longer with a loving mother and I got my first beating. Pani Borcinska accused me of being too lazy to get up to use the chamber pot (we were allowed to use the pot a night in order not to have to go out to the toilets that were located at the other end of the landing, down a long hallway, used by all the residents of the several apartments on our floor).

The accident occurred again, and then again, on a regular basis. It became a nightmare. I'd use the potty the last thing before going to bed; I would not drink any liquids from noon on; I'd try to stay awake and not sleep all night lest it happened the moment I fell asleep. Of course, I would eventually fall asleep and invariably wake up feeling the wet warmth beneath me. The beatings got increasingly more ferocious. I began dreading the nights, knowing there was no way I could stop myself from falling asleep and that once asleep I had no control over my bladder. I would have dreams in which I was in a toilet and would question myself whether I was asleep or awake. In the dream, I would convince myself that I was awake and could safely empty my bladder – then wake up and realize I had been asleep and had again wetted the bed. My relief was immense those mornings I woke up dry. It got to the point that I was afraid to use the toilet during the day as well, since how could I be sure I was really awake and not again in bed dreaming and wake up having wetted the bed?

Bozenka was a very thin, pretty girl, about my height, with blond hair and gray eyes. She was almost two years my senior, although Pani Borcinska did not believe I had told her the truth about my age and insisted that I was surely at least ten years old, if not

older. She held that my size compared to Bozenka's was surely proof enough that I was not younger than her daughter.

I asked Bozenka to teach me some prayers and she was glad to do so. She also showed me how to properly cross myself and gave me her little catechism to read. This family neither went to church nor did they ever seem to pray in front of their altar. Although I had known about kneeling down to pray, since nobody here seemed to be doing that, I assumed they must be praying in bed before going to sleep and I decided that must be also proper. The night after having been instructed, the moment I was in bed, I crossed myself and began my prayers. Since Bozenka and I were sent to bed while the others could still sit around the kitchen table, Pani Borcinska saw what I was doing and became furious. How dare I mock Catholic practice? Did I believe I could fool her? She warned me not to repeat the sacrilege. I had already learned that it was pointless to contradict her and so did not deny that I was pretending – she would only accuse me of being a liar and I would get a beating. I overheard Bozenka telling her the next day that I seemed sincere, but it was useless and her mother would not listen to Bozenka either once she had made up her mind about me.

I had read by then that a good Catholic does not deny his or her religion, but being already so sore from the many beatings, fearing to provoke more, I started praying in secret, begging Jesus to forgive me for not daring to do so openly. At the same time I prayed for forgiveness for Pani Borcinska who did not know what she was doing...

She kept finding new reasons for venting her fury upon my body, having a vast variety of creative moves, from twisting an ear or my nose, swinging the poker wherever it could hit me, or using her hand directly, fist open or clenched, on whichever part of me it was easiest for her at the moment. My head was a regular target but my face, back and arms were also often convenient.

Panna Basia had not returned, but a young man, Pan Jozio showed up one day and told me I now had a choice to go to the convent or stay permanently where I was, because Pani Borcinska offered to keep me. He made it clear that I could not go with him that day but that he needed to know how I felt. What a question! Of course I wanted to go – anywhere but stay here!! Yet I was afraid to say so out loud. I dreaded what she might do to me after he left if I said I did not want to stay. I was also convinced that should something go wrong and I had to stay on, she would make me pay dearly for having said I wanted to leave. She did not leave us alone for a moment and all I could do was beg Jozio with my eyes that I don't dare say it, but please, please, get me away from here... Jozio did not understand. He asked me, "Well? What do you say?" Pani Borcinska started prompting, "Why don't you answer the question?" and then to Jozio, "Why, we all know what conditions would await her in the convent. It's well known how they put children to hard labor and hardly even feed them. She would certainly not have it as good as here. Here she may wake up hungry, but she never goes to bed on an empty stomach." And turning to me, in her most ingratiating tone of voice with a warmth of human kindness she always managed to put on in the presence of a visitor, "Well, tell him child if you don't have it good here, if anyone mistreats you, if you don't have a good companion in Bozenka, or are asked to even lift a finger to do any work." I remained silent and she continued to Jozio with a deep sigh, "But that's the way she sometimes gets, as if a cat had got her tongue. Though you should only hear them when together with my Bozenka she yaks on without end until one gets a headache just from their jabber."

Pan Jozio insisted that I must say something, so, still begging him with my eyes to see my fear and hear the lie, I quietly said I would stay. He left convinced I wanted to stay, perhaps even having concluded that I was a strange child, indeed. For a while I was hoping he understood my mute plea and would return to get me. He did not.

Pani Borcinska did not want me to stay in order to have a victim to torture. She originally agreed to temporarily take in a Jewish child for the money she would get for it and she ended up getting paid from two sources, the Jewish and the Polish underground resistance organizations, one not knowing the other was paying. She was not about to let go of such unexpected source of income if she could help it. She did not intend to be unkind but could she help it that I provoked her so?

It had become clear to me that short of a miracle, I was to remain there permanently. Occasionally I would fantasize running away but, although the clumsy, sullen, robot-like little persona had not yet fully taken over, the transformation had begun; I was becoming a different child from the one who had left the Ghetto and I simply felt trapped.

It was true that I did not suffer from hunger. Although never again while in this house did I see a fresh buttered roll with ham, there was always a slab of dark bread with marmalade for breakfast, some soup for lunch, and usually potatoes in some form and a salad for supper. Various grains were abundant, either with the soup or as a main course, and they were tasty and filling. Later, when I could go to the Community Center, I also got to eat cooked vegetables and the mashed potatoes with carrots and beets served there have become a favorite dish of mine.

On Sundays, Pani Borcinska often made potato dumplings with onion fried in lard, a food I grew to love. Christmas was celebrated with a special meal and usually two cakes, a plain pound cake and an, oh so yummy, moist poppy seed cake. The whole kitchen would be fragrant with the aroma of the baking and the cakes lasted us for days. The best tidbits always went to Bozenka, from generous helpings of butter or a larger portion of meat, whenever we had any, to all sorts of extras. But Bozenka was always ailing, alternately suffering from jaundice, some sort of tuberculosis, and other ailments, while I seemed amazingly healthy. Although not as thin as Bozenka, I certainly was not chubby, but I had the tendency to a protruding, swollen belly and Pani Borcinska would show this off as proof of how well she fed me.

Soon after my arrival, instead of pulling out the kitchen table for us all to sit round it, Bozenka and I got to sit separately at a small table by our bed. Later, Bozenka was told to join the family at their table and I was left to eat by myself.

Pan Borcinski, was a blond, blue eyed, squat man with a gentle mien. He never wanted to take in a Jewish child because he did not want to endanger the family, especially his beloved Bozenka. But his wife prevailed and he agreed to the temporary arrangement. Then, when the money began to make a difference in their lives, she convinced him they might as well continue keeping me, their lives being in danger anyway since he belonged to the Resistance in which also Danusia and Bogdan began to play increasingly active roles. And so he agreed to that as well. Having agreed to my staying with them, Pan Borcinski was never anything but kind to me. Whenever we found

ourselves alone, he would attempt to get me out of my gloom, be it with a “boo,” to surprise me with his sudden appearance, or some humorous remark to cheer me up. This made me very uncomfortable. The constant terror in which I lived there made it impossible for me to respond affectionately and I just wished he would stop being kind. I learned how to brace myself to bear cruelty – the feeling of gratitude for all his small gestures of kindness and sympathy was too much of a burden. What I found especially hard to bear were the nights he would come home drunk and berate his wife for treating me the way she did. They would start fighting and it invariably ended up with her beating him up. I would rather take the blows myself than have that sweet, gently man suffer them for trying against the odds to protect me.

Pani Borcinska said that since I was with them as their relative, I should call her Auntie and Pan Borcinski Uncle. Auntie, as I now forced myself to call her, had warned me to be very careful when washing not to let any soap suds fall on the wooden kitchen floor because they would leave stains that could not be taken out. One evening, as I was carefully washing my feet at the sink before going to bed, Bogdan, a lanky, blond boy with gray-green eyes and a streetwise air kept watching me and asked with a smirk, “How does it feel to wash yourself with a soap made out of our brothers and sisters?” I looked up uncomprehending while Auntie hissed at me to be careful lest I leave some spots. At the same time she told Bogdan to shut up. I was now looking at Uncle who, seated at the kitchen table, had put down the newspaper he had been reading. There was pain on his face as he gently answered my look, “Yes, it’s true, I’m afraid. The soap we get is made in the camps of Jewish fat.” I stared at him while this information was sinking in. I still did not know about the camps. Bogdan could not stop himself from adding, “And new lamp shades from their skin.” At this point he received a blow from Auntie who advised him to keep his trap shut or he would really get it from her, while he protested that I might as well know what was what.

I put the soap down, my heart pounding as I rinsed off. The next few days I did not touch the soap until Auntie noticed and told me I better wash up properly or I would get it from her. After I got it from her with a new rubber truncheon Bogdan had recently brought home, I managed to use the soap again without thinking how it was made. I was quickly learning how to stop thinking or feeling anything that was unbearable. It was as if nothing could get to me, nothing could touch me any longer. I did not cry out or react when beaten, kicked, had my hair pulled or parts of my body squeezed and twisted, which enraged Auntie even more. “She’s not even human,” she would exclaim, when at times Bozenka or Danusia tried to intervene and get her to stop. She was right – I was no longer a “normal human child.”

Although most of the time she was not a loving, nurturing mother to her own children either, she did have moments of tenderness, especially towards Bozenka with whom she could be quite affectionate. When she got into one of her fits, she was liable to hand it out to them as well, but they were used to her and had learned how to protect themselves. I had never before experienced anybody talking or behaving in such a manner and my constant state of shock was only slowly turning into numbness, my being encased in a hard shell.

At Christmas she was in a particularly good mood and even gave me a present. I hoped something changed in her, but the mood did not last long. One night I dreamt Auntie had kissed me good night and innocently told Bozenka of my dream. She repeated

it to her mother who became enraged. “And what pray have you done recently to deserve being kissed, you poor excuse of a human child! Kissing a stone might give me greater pleasure!”

In addition to her physical treatment, Auntie also had a vast verbal repertoire. At first it was just ridicule. Shortly after I got there, Auntie asked me about my mother. When I told her my mother was an actress, she burst out laughing. “My, my, you sure know how to give yourself airs – actress indeed! Perhaps she was once an extra, but don’t you go around telling tall tales to make yourself important. Who do you think you are anyway?”

Within the first few weeks of my arrival my parents were able to forward some of my clothes through the underground contacts. The packages never came to the apartment only some messenger would notify Auntie where to pick one up. One day I saw Bozenka wearing a dress I recognized and, happy to see the familiar sight I innocently exclaimed, “Oh, my dress!” Auntie gave me a cold stare declaring that she had just purchased this dress for Bozenka. If it looked like something I may have once had, it was no reason to accuse her of giving Bozenka my things. If necessary, she would teach me how to keep such uncalled for remarks from coming out of my stupid mouth and unhealthy imagination. Some of my clothing was unmistakable. There was this dress my mother had sewn herself from several of her old, torn frocks. There was a sweater she had patched up from one I had outgrown with one of her old ones and dyed it black to cover up the two not so well matching shades. No other garments on the face of the earth could possibly simply look those very original outfits, but needless to say, I kept quiet from then on whenever I recognized some familiar item. Some of it she did give to me, declaring with a honeyed smile that those parents of mine had finally seen fit to send me something, as she was certainly not able to clothe as well as feed me.

As I began to react less and less to everything, I also seemed to become unable to do anything properly and things would drop from my hands or I would lose the money given me for a small purchase at the grocery store. Then came the “You clumsy good for nothing!” or “You stupid imbecile, I really wonder what your parents must be like to have produced such a piece of shit.” Or else, “Nitwit that you are, just knows how to eat and shit, and pee out of laziness to get her worthless ass out of the bed,” usually followed by blows. By then I had hardened myself to both the words and the blows and more and more I began to see that she was right and that I really was useless and worthless, just a caricature of a human child. There were other moments, away from her influence, when a different persona would emerge, but the two were separate, as if one not aware of the existence of the other.

I was not the only one who lived in terror of Auntie. Her animals, especially Komar, the dog, would also get savage beatings. He was so afraid of her when she called him in the tone of voice that bode nothing good, that even as he obeyed by moving towards her his whole path would get wet with the urine he could not control as he crept crouching close to the floor, whimpering, perhaps hoping to disappear before he reached her. Of course, he now got twice the beating for what he did on the way. His helpless yelps could be heard all through the building. And yet, months later, when my mother had escaped from the Ghetto and stayed with us for a short time during which Auntie modified her treatment of me to a great extent, before Mama left she begged Auntie to treat me at least half as well as she treated her dog.

There was only one thing she never accused me of and would never believe that I stole from her. Whether it was that she deemed me too stupid or too cowardly, whatever the reason, much as she would by then never trust me to do anything properly, she was convinced I would not steal. We all knew where she kept cash in a mug. One day she found the money missing and asked me if I saw who took it. I knew it was Bogdan. Before I could decide how to respond, Auntie herself concluded he had to be the one. Bozenka was not likely to steal from her mother and Danusia was not around that day, so she confronted her son. Arrogantly, he wanted to know why she should suspect him and not the Jewish bitch. She began to beat him but he managed to escape and ran out into the landing. Convinced that I had told on him, he screamed at the top of his voice as he started running down the stairs, “Yes, believe a slandering Yid! The fucking good for nothing kike is now more valuable to you than your own flesh and blood!!” Fortunately nobody was around to hear this and Auntie managed to run after him, catch up and drag him back into the apartment. This time he really got it from her...

Danusia was a dark blond young woman with dark blue eyes and somewhat protruding teeth. She didn't have much to do with either Bozenka or me until the Russian air raids began to take place almost nightly and Auntie told her to take us to the country every evening in order to avoid having to go down to the shelter in the middle of the night. All along Danusia treated me pretty much as she did her sister. While never cruel, neither did she go out of her way to be especially kind to me as their father did, and this made it more comfortable for me to be with her.

We would take a streetcar to the furthest suburb of Warsaw and then continue on foot to a village where we would ask a villager's permission to sleep in their barn. Some nights we were joined by others who also preferred to escape from the city, though Bozenka and I were invariably the only children. I would doze off to the drone of voices telling stories round the campfire. At times we were also treated to some potatoes we would roast in the fire and eat under the stars of the peaceful countryside sky.

When eventually we lay down to sleep in the barn, both Danusia and Bozenka would arrange themselves on the sweet smelling hay at a distance from me, since one never knew when I would wet under myself. They were annoyed when my wetness spread to where they lay, but neither of them ever told their mother about my accidents and I did not get any beatings during this time, at least not for bed wetting. Once Danusia lost her mother's kerchief, which she borrowed for the trip, and became frightened when asked for it upon our return in the morning. I quickly said that I had lost it; I was glad I could repay Danusia's kindness to me by taking the beating for her. She never said anything, but from that day on was even nicer to me.

Eventually the nightly raids had stopped and so did our nightly excursions out of Warsaw. Danusia then decided, possibly at Auntie's insistence, to give Bozenka and me lessons. She found an old textbook and both Bozenka and I became diligent students in reading and writing, the only subject in which Danusia felt competent to tutor us.

Soon after I arrived in their home, Bozenka checked to see what I knew about “the facts of life” and, seeing that I didn't know anything, proceeded to tell me in great detail exactly how babies were made. At first, I would not believe her – it sounded so preposterous. When she managed to convince me that she had this on the best authority, I concluded that this must be the way Polish children get made; surely the Jews had

another way, or would I not have heard of it in all my eight years of life? But when Bozenka laughing asked me how I thought Jewish children got here, I was at a loss for an answer. Somehow I had never wondered about this before.

After Bozenka had told me how babies wee made, she also began telling me what games boys liked to play with girls, making it very clear it was a bad and shameful thing to do. She confided how once when visiting her friend, Tereska, she witnessed her friend being forced by her two brothers to get undressed and was then chased by them until caught, put on a table and overpowered so as to have to submit to their doing with her as they pleased. Bozenka described with great relish exactly what the boys did to their sister. She hinted at a suspicion that Tereska liked these games and was only embarrassed at Bozenka's presence. As I listened, I could not fail but notice that although Bozenka assumed an indignant tone at such doings, she was as fascinated by this activity as I was both amazed and fascinated upon hearing it. It did not occur to me then to wonder how they simply allowed Bozenka to witness without involving her as well. But I could not help but wonder later what was going on when Bogdan would sometimes come to our bed. Bozenka and Danusia slept together at the head of the bed and I at the foot. I heard sounds and movements at their end, eventually ending with one of them sending Bogdan out of the bed. One night Danusia simply said, "Oh, why don't you just go to Marysia," and he came over to my side. He started caressing me and that felt nice. But of course I knew by then that this was wrong, so I started to protest. Bogdan said he could teach me something that would feel very nice, and he told me to ask Danusia if I did not believe him how nice he could make me feel. However, I remembered Bozenka's tales intimating that this was not an acceptable activity, so I continued to protest. He laughed and left me alone, only to return a few nights later. This time I pretended to be asleep. After all, if I was asleep, I could not help it that Bogdan did to me what was wrong but what really felt so very nice. How did he know exactly where to touch me so it felt best? And what in the world could he possibly get out of it when the pleasure was all mine? I started to look forward to his visits, however much I would never have admitted it – how shameful of me to enjoy what I learned from Bozenka was a wrong and unacceptable activity...

At first, Bozenka treated me as she would any new girl in her environment. Occasionally she would take me with her when she went out but at home we spent increasingly more time together, especially in the evenings before going to sleep. Once my papers were in order, however, and my presence as part of this family established, Bozenka started to take me along regularly whenever she went out. Away from Auntie's presence, some of my terror would ease and I felt more comfortable with Bozenka. In the beginning, since I did not know anything about the possibilities open to us there, I gladly allowed her to lead but in time I realized that we got along well only so long as I was willing for her to be the one who always decided where we went and what we did and our relationship had taken on an uneven slant to remain so for the duration of my years there. I became conditioned to my subservience to the girl and did not dare oppose her – after all, all she needed do was complain to her mother and I would get it from the latter...

In many ways, we were quite compatible. After joining the local Community Center for kids, the two of us were soon being chosen as the lead pair in folk dances. Since Bozenka had a beautiful voice, she would be also given songs to sing solo; I did not sing well but I was always asked to recite poems. In choral singing, Bozenka would be

the one to always carry the right tune and pitch while I would be the one to always remember the words and could be relied upon to give the right cues.

That carefree interlude did not last long. I had taught Bozenka how to tie cotton string to make bags, a craft I had learned in my third grade arts and crafts class. When Auntie saw our two finished bags, she decided we could earn some money this way and we soon had a little sweatshop at home, producing bag after bag till my fingers were cut and blistered from constantly tying the string. We began selling our bags at the market and would also go into various beauty parlors to show our bags to the women there. We started making money! Auntie was very pleased and gave each of us some of the money to spend as we wished. My wish, a very deep, long standing one, was to have a doll.

I had many dolls before the war which, along with many other of my toys could not be taken with us when we moved into the Ghetto. I kept hoping for a doll when my eighth birthday approached and was very disappointed when I received my first watch instead. My birthday was celebrated very modestly in the Ghetto and my parents apologized for my lack of appreciation to their generous friend who gave me such an expensive gift. They tried to convince me that a watch was much more appropriate for a big girl who was already in the third grade, but I knew what it was I longed for.

With everything that had happened since, my longing for a doll seemed forgotten, but it never disappeared. Well, now I could buy it myself and have something of my own to love. The money I was given was enough for only a very small doll, but that did not matter to me. Bozenka also got involved in helping me make her a little bed and some clothes.

Once, I was so engaged when a neighbor came in. Pani Lasocka was the only neighbor with whom Auntie was on speaking terms. I was always glad when someone came to visit because Auntie would then be nice to me. Pani Lasocka herself was always very friendly and nice to me. She watched me play for a while and then said that she would bring me something in a few days. She returned with a beautiful crocheted dress for my doll. Little did she know what her kindness would cost me. Auntie soon decided that this little doll in her new costume was the perfect decoration for her bed, and I was not allowed to play with her again.

From time to time our apartment became a temporary shelter for Jews or members of the Polish Resistance. Auntie was not gracious to the former, often threatening them they would be thrown out into the street unless some money came in or if they needed to stay longer than originally agreed upon. Once she actually made a Jewish woman leave just before the curfew, a time it was dangerous even for a Pole to be out in the street.

One day, when the money for me was late in coming, Auntie took me to a contact address she had and threatened she would either just leave me in the street or take directly to the Gestapo unless she got some money soon. Whether or not she got paid soon thereafter I never knew, but she did not follow through with her threat. I dreamt though that I was being chased by the Germans, one of them close enough to shoot me point blank. Just as a bullet was about to hit me, I screamed that this was a dream and I wanted to wake up – and I did make myself wake up. Although I was in a place where I was very unhappy, I was not being shot at and was alive...

And one day my mother showed up. During he stay, Auntie held back from abusing me and directed her verbal venom mostly towards my mother. Mama counseled me to pay no attention to any of it, repeating again and again that what mattered was simply to survive. We held each other in our arms and slept together on the floor in the room where all the temporary “guests” would stay. But my mother was appalled by the absence of what she considered minimal personal hygiene, something she still held to be only second in importance to mere survival. Ignoring the verbal abuse she was provoking, Mama threw herself into making certain changes. She would give herself a full sponge bath under the kitchen sink, with a coat over her shoulders as the only privacy possible. Whenever possible, she would do so daily, insisting I should also follow this practice and greatly encouraging Bozenka as well. This was simply unheard of in this household. We were expected to wash our feet before going to bed, and wash our hands, face and behind the ears in the morning. Once a week, on Sundays, water got heated up and each of us took turns to wash first from waist up, then from the waist down, in a basin provided for this purpose. Everyone else had to stay out of the kitchen to give the one taking such a bath full privacy. Auntie insisted that it was not healthy to wash oneself fully more often than this as my mama was doing and was contemptuous of Mama’s lack of modesty since she would do her sponge baths regardless of whether or not she was given full privacy which Auntie was certainly not about to offer other than once a week.

Our hair did not get washed more than once a month, if that, and my mother immediately insisted on cutting both mine and Bozenka’s hair to be followed by a thorough wash and a vigorous fight to rid us of the lice we carried. Reluctantly at first, Bozenka submitted to all this and to Mama’s daily combing our hair with a special comb to catch the lice and their eggs. And indeed, after a while, for a while, we wee free of lice. Auntie claimed there had never been lice in her house until I showed up and that surely I had brought them with me since such frequent washing was without doubt responsible for their creation.

I never had any lice before, not even in the Ghetto, under Mama’s alert watch for them. Whenever one showed up, as they were bound to from even a casual contact with someone in the crowded street, Mama made sure it did not multiply and she never had to cut my hair in order to keep me lice free. Since my arrival at this house, I got accustomed to having lice both in my hair and in my clothes, and we had evolved great skill in catching and killing them by squeezing each between the two nails of our index fingers. But we could never get rid of them completely and constant itching was the norm. Mama, however, was determined to completely rid us of lice.

Auntie allowed Bozenka and me to go to the public baths and from then on we would go there at least twice a year. There we could delight in a warm shower while our clothes were being disinfected and deloused, returned to us warm – a pleasure on a cold winter’s day. Otherwise, after my mother left us, everything else went back to the practices before her arrival.

There were limits, of course, as to how much change Mother could bring in while she was with us. Our bedclothes, for instance, got washed twice a year, for Christmas and for Easter. Starting early in the morning, Auntie would boil everything in a huge pot, set up a wash tub in the middle of the kitchen, then soap and rub each item over the scrub board, wring it all out and finally rinse in fresh water. It was hard work and she wanted us all out of the house most of the time on those days. When I arrived, it was exactly half term between the washings and the stench was at its worst, exacerbated by the fact that Danusia was suffering from a severe postpartum infection. I gathered from overhearing

certain conversations that shortly before my arrival, Danusia separated from her husband and returned to her mother to give birth to a baby that was either stillborn or died soon after birth. My bed-wetting certainly did not help either...

My mother could also not stop herself from wincing when she saw that everybody was using the same toothbrush (the one I had brought with me), but she knew she could only hold her own against Auntie so much and had to choose her priorities. She would constantly remind herself as well as me that everything had to be endured in order to survive, and she never wavered in her trust that I could survive the war with this family.

Soon, Mother was gone. It was still uncertain where she would be able to hide next and hide she had to because her looks would immediately give her away. I was considered lucky to be able to go about freely, nothing about me suggesting I might be Jewish. But Mother was overstaying here and some other temporary place was prepared for her. We still did not know the fate of my father. Nine months have elapsed since I was smuggled out of the Ghetto and the Ghetto was now burning. I did not know then that there had been an uprising, the handful of Jews still not deported fighting the German might and holding out for almost a whole month before being squashed. Now, night after night the sky was red as if in a never-ending tropical sunset. Our neighbors would stand in the street, chuckle and rub their hands with glee at the sight: The Yids wee being fried – at least one good thing was happening, ha, ha, ha...

Bozenka and I were now given silk stocking and perfumed soap to sell in addition to our baskets. At times we still managed to go to the park or the Community Center, but when that was not possible, we created fantasy games that kept us fully absorbed. We would sit in some corner or lie in bed at night and pretend we were countesses or princesses, married and had many children. We described in great detail our own physical appearance as well as that of our husbands and the children. We kept track of their names and ages, shared their exploits and our dealings with each. We would invariably see ourselves as active in the Resistance, accomplishing great feats of valor. We were beautiful, educated, intelligent, and also very religious, heroic young women of nobility. We could go on for hours sharing our fantasy lives. Auntie demanded to know what we were whispering about all the time but Bozenka knew how to pacify her and she left us alone.

We never referred to Bogdan's visits in our bed at night. Later, when Bogdan was no longer with us, we would pretend at times to be one of our children, an older girl, who had many varied experiences with boys. At first we would simply describe what a particular boy did to the girl, but Bozenka soon surprised me one evening in bed when she decided to demonstrate on my body what was being done. I picked up the cue and from then on we would take turns touching each other while saying that was what the boy was doing to the girl while she was asleep or otherwise unable to protect herself from his advances. These games with Bozenka were almost as fulfilling as the previously experienced visits of Bogdan, and certainly more acceptable according to Bozenka's criterion as to what was right and wrong which I fully embraced.

The many activities of the Resistance included sabotage at German factories. Once, a candy factory was targeted and there were many kilos of “confiscated” hard candy to be disposed of. For weeks we all stuffed ourselves with the candy as much as we could while Bozenka and I were also entrusted to carry some packages of this incriminating evidence to certain addresses. Thus we were also taking an active part in the Resistance for real, no longer merely in fantasy. We walked boldly, knowing we were on a dangerous mission since, should we be stopped and the packages inspected, we could end up at the Gestapo. A German soldier once actually helped me carry a package, chuckling that such a little girl had to carry such a heavy load, never suspecting he was helping the work of the Polish Resistance, not to mention easing the load of a Jewish child. We were proud to be actively helping out.

Soon thereafter Bozenka concluded that we should no longer go to the movies as this meant supporting the German industry. Of course I agreed, but it was hard to renounce this occasional respite from my unhappy existence. Auntie had allowed us every now and then to go to a Sunday matinee and that was my only chance to truly escape from my reality, at the same time gaining new ideas and possibilities for my fantasy world and our games. There were a number of movie houses to choose from and we would walk from one to another, looking at the photos from the movie being shown and choose the one we felt would be best. We were never disappointed. Mostly we got to see German movies but every now and then also an old Polish comedy. Giving this up was not easy for me but, after all, I was a patriotic Polish countess active in the Resistance, and sacrifices were necessary...

A gentle knock at the door and a man walked in. Despite the mustache and the railroad conductor’s uniform, I immediately recognized my father. Zombie like, I continued to sit on my stool, waiting to see what would happen. I was not sure it was safe to acknowledge him. He talked briefly with Auntie who gave me a nudge, “Don’t you know your own father? Don’t you want to greet him?” Having her permission, with him obviously having identified himself to her, I managed to get up and we hugged. He was soon gone, but I had overheard a conversation from which I learned that my parents were together hiding in Zielonka, a village not far from Warsaw.

One day I was out in the street alone when Uncle was walking home from work. He greeted me with his usual friendliness and gave me 50grosz, suggesting I buy myself a soda. I saved the money and at the next opportunity I had to again be alone I walked over to the railway station to find out how much a ticket to Zielonka would cost. It appeared I had enough money. There were many times in the past when I fantasized running away, but now I had a concrete destination. I would find my parents and I would convince them to let me stay with them! I bought a ticket and was soon on a train speeding to Zielonka.

I had memorized the address where my parents were supposed to be hiding and just walked, not asking for directions, as if trusting my feet to take me to my parents. I found the right street but when standing in front of the right house, I did not know what to do. Could I simply knock and ask for them? What if they were no longer there? What if they were there but whoever opened the door did not know about it and I would cause their being discovered? I remained standing for a few minutes and then the door opened and a woman told me to come in. My mother’s instinct once again sensed my presence...

My parents, along with eleven other people, were hiding in the cellar. They never went upstairs, as even the woman's boyfriend did not know about their presence and one never knew when he might show up. But something similar to the episode at the *Umschlagplatz* forced my mother to go up, look through the window and see me standing there undecided what to do.

Mama took me down to the cramped cellar room. I got hugged and kissed and loved by all and then told I could not stay. I begged my parents not to send me back, promising I would be very good and very quiet, and need not eat much, and would not be any bother to anybody there, just please, please, don't send me back!

Much like the way she convinced me to leave them in the Ghetto, Mama was now explaining why I could not stay with them. She said that they did not know how long they could stay there and who knew where they might have to hide next, and that it was unlikely that any of the people who hid them would consider taking in a child. And my staying with them could now make not only their own survival impossible, but also that of the other eleven people. I had perfectly good papers and looks and did not have to hide, and no matter how difficult it might be for me until the end of the war, I could survive with the Borcinskis. I was not convinced. None of my mother's logic was making any impact on me and I was inconsolable. I felt and told my parents that even if I survived there physically, I'd be dead inside. I did not agree to our separation this time, but I was given no choice and had to leave.

On my way back I braced myself for what might await me. After admitting where I had been, however, I did not get a beating. Instead, Auntie got the idea of sending me there again with Bozenka who would be well briefed as to what to say to my parents. A short time later we were both on our way to Zielonka. I was concerned about bringing Bozenka and felt guilty of possibly being instrumental in opening my parents up to blackmail, perhaps forcing them to have to flee again. But they did not seem upset about our visit and I basked in my parents' love, some of my old spunk emerging so much so that on our trip back I dared to oppose Bozenka and for a little while refused to be totally dominated by her. Bozenka threatened to tell her mother how beastly I had become.

It was not usual for me to join other children in the park without Bozenka. When alone, I preferred long walks along the different streets, often going to the fashionable Marszalkowska Street where I would admire the pretty clothes in the shop windows. I promised myself never to wear anything ugly after the war. With such beautiful dresses and lingerie available, why buy something ugly?

One day, though, I did go to the park alone and somehow found myself telling the other girls how my Auntie mistreated me, how afraid I was of her, and how obliged to do whatever Bozenka wanted, lest she complain to Auntie about me and I get a beating. When the next time Bozenka came along, the girls confronted her with what I had said and, terrified, I vehemently denied having said anything of the kind. Bozenka began interrogating them until one of them, Wiesia, sensitive to my terror, interrupted saying the others were lying, that she never heard me say anything against Bozenka or her mother, and that she could not understand why the others were pulling such a trick on her. Bozenka seemed appeased and the accusation was never reported to Auntie. From that day on Wiesia became a friend with whom I was soon able to spend increasingly more time. Bozenka had begun associating with a group of older girls in whose company

I was not included, and I was free to get together with Wiesia. We became almost inseparable, going together to church and for walks, as well as spending time in her home where her parents were kind to me. We did not play any fantasy games, just hung out together enjoying the growing trust and friendship between us. Having Wiesia in my life made a very big difference and I no longer felt so desperately alone and friendless. Still, despite feeling free to share everything else with one another, I knew there was one thing I could not share with her – the truth about who I really was. Once I told her that there was something I could not tell her till after the war and she did not seem to attach any importance to this.

Eventually we were denounced. We were all home and froze when we heard the heavy footsteps nearing our floor. Bogdan and Uncle dug into the cupboard where there was a lot of illegal literature which Auntie and Danusia quickly started feeding into the oven. Bozenka and I looked at one another, not sure what to do. There was nobody hiding with us at this time, but there were guns in our storage closet in the hall. And there was not enough time to get rid of any of it. They bust into the kitchen ordering us all to lie face down on the floor and the search began. It did not last long. They left taking Uncle and Bogdan away. I never saw them again, though after the war I heard that Bogdan had survived. My “Uncle,” the kind, gentle man, was murdered in Auschwitz. I never had the chance to thank him and tell him that I loved him; that under the armor Marysia had erected around her heart there hid love and gratitude for this kind, gentle being, Jozef Borcinski.

Obviously we were denounced as members of the Resistance and not for harboring a Jewish child. Still, after this event Danusia, Bozenka and I were sent to lay low in Wlochy, a little village near Warsaw where Danusia’s boyfriend had a room. It was a heavenly interlude of being away from Auntie. Danusia left Bozenka and me pretty much alone, free to do as we pleased. Soon some boys began to show an interest in us and although I was very shy, I did like one of them and hoped he would find the courage to approach me. Bozenka explained to me that there was no point in my falling in love with a Polish boy since as soon as the war was over and he found out I was Jewish, surely he would not want to have anything to do with me. But could such logic prevent a girl from falling in love? I continued looking at the boy wistfully while he continued gazing at me from some distance, never daring to make a bolder move.

Then it was deemed safe for us to return home and life continued more or less routinely.

Almost two years had passed since I came to stay with this family. Suddenly, Danusia’s estranged husband showed up with the news that the Russians were getting closer and that members of the Resistance were now joining the Partisans and becoming a regular army, preparing for an uprising in Warsaw. Danusia left with him to join the “army” to start the uprising. Almost overnight Warsaw literally went under the ground. People moved into cellars and passages were opened up from one cellar to another, almost the whole city so connected under the buildings and through tunnels under the streets. Barricades enabling us to cross from one side of a street to another were erected where an underground passage was not possible. There was shooting all over the town and German cannon balls were hitting the houses.

Although we were safely in the cellar when our house got hit, rubble from the shattered house was all around us and Auntie decided we should move. Amazingly, we

managed to find our way through one cellar after another and a quick run across some streets protected by the barricades to the location where Danusia was stationed. Auntie joined some other non-fighting women there making hand grenades, while Bozenka and I, the only two children at this unit, got to eat a lot of sugar which was being used in the manufacture of the grenades. And we were left pretty much free to roam through the various tunnels, pretending to be on important liaison missions. Hope was in the air that the Russians would come to our aid and that the war would soon be over. Instead, after two months of fierce fighting the uprising was over and all the young people were sent to Germany. I never saw Danusia again, but years later I learned that after being liberated by the British she chose to go to London instead of returning to the by then Communist Poland.

Old women and children got sent to various villages throughout Poland, far away from Warsaw, where the peasants were obliged to house and feed these Warsaw Exiles. Warsaw was left without any inhabitants.

Auntie, her older sister, Auntie Olesia who had joined us during the uprising, Bozenka and I were marched out of Warsaw along with other older women and children, though not many of the latter. After a full day's march we arrived at a transit camp where we remained for several days and were then loaded up on trains which took us somewhere in the Kielce province; from there our journey continued by a horse drawn cart to a remote village.

We were given a rather large room with two beds in the house of one peasant family and would get our daily food from several of the other peasants of the village who were not housing anyone from Warsaw. Once the winter came the village was rather hard to cross and Bozenka and I were often sinking up to our knees in the snow on our daily trips to collect some food. But neither of us minded these trips, especially those which led us to the house where we got our bread and could on our way back rip off and eat chunks of the still warm, freshly baked country loaf. Auntie grumbled when Bozenka put the already sampled bread on the table but on the whole she was content to just sit and do nothing, enjoying the company of her sister, and hardly paid any attention to me. We all soon adjusted to our new life routines. Most of the time we had no idea what was happening in the world outside this isolated village. At one point we started hearing rumors of Russian advances and eventually of Warsaw having already been liberated, but we continued to be far away from everything, snowed under, lodged and fed by the peasants under strict German orders to do so.

Finally it was verified that the Russians had arrived. Although one was as yet to be seen in our village, the whole area had apparently been liberated as, we were assured, was Warsaw. But Auntie was not in a hurry to move. While it was true that travel might be extremely difficult due to the snow, Bozenka told me she was not going to wait till her mother was good and ready but wanted to set out immediately and hopefully find her father. I was certainly eager to join her. Aunt Olesia was reading cards and told me that a tall dark man was looking for me – surely it was my father!

However, before Bozenka and I managed to devise a plan how to run away and make it to Warsaw on our own, the snows began to melt and the peasants began to grumble that the Warsaw exiles no longer needed to remain and be a burden to them. One day Auntie announced we were going back.

She had been keeping me now a long time without any money for me coming in and she was willing to continue and keep me on the chance that either my parents or some other relative had survived and would handsomely remunerate her for all the

trouble and expense I had been to her. Otherwise, she had a plan to sell me to some peasants. One way or another she would make having kept me pay off. Aunt Olesia listened to her without comment. Overhearing these plans I began fantasizing how I would run away after being sold, at the same time wondering if I would find the courage to do it, since I had so often fantasized about running away from Auntie but never made any such attempt, other than that time when I knew where my parents were and ran to be with them...

We made it back and found Warsaw all in ruins. What was not damaged during the uprising was demolished – at least most of it after the city was left without its inhabitants. The returning exiles needed to settle down in Praga, across the Vistula, and Auntie also found there a room for us. On all of the ruins in Warsaw were posted notices. Even if there was no skeleton of a house remaining, notices were posted in the approximate location where a house used to stand, giving the current addresses of those who used to live there. Slowly, a number of people were so reunited. Auntie posted her new address including the information that I (giving both my real name and the name of my false papers) was with her. And we waited.

Bozenka was under strict orders never to leave me out of her sight. Auntie was not going to risk losing me without proper compensation.

One day, as Bozenka and I were taking a walk down the street where we now lived, a truck passed us by and came to a sudden halt; my father's voice was calling my name. Bozenka held out a restraining hand to prevent my running in his direction, but he had already jumped down and was rushing toward us. The next moment I was in his arms.

.....